

Case study: Executive and professional jobseekers

The Foundation for Jobseekers

Accepting a less well paid and lower status job

Alistair was referred to the Executive Job Club, a member of The Foundation for Jobseekers, by Jobcentre Plus. Apart from one or two weeks of temporary employment, he had been unemployed for two years prior to joining the job club, despite a very successful previous career in new house sales. His last role was at director level. Initially, Alistair, who is in his 50s, had felt very confident that he would be able to re-enter the job market at a similar level, either in the same industry, or using his transferable skills to find a similar role in a different sector – after all, he had enjoyed significant prior career success.

However, over time, Alistair's motivation and self-esteem were severely eroded as a result of constant rejections. Barriers he encountered included fewer opportunities because of the recession; the limited number of opportunities at his level; and a clearly perceived objection to his age – all of which resulted in very few interviews or interview success. Another barrier was his entirely reasonable belief that he was capable of doing a job at a similar level again.

Alistair was faithfully attending the group job search presentations, where his morale was boosted significantly by support from other jobseekers, but it was swiftly apparent that Alistair needed considerable one-to-one support from the same volunteer adviser each week. Alistair had decided to consider his partner's suggestion that he should try to get his foot in the working door again by applying for jobs at a lower level, where there were more opportunities and he would be able to demonstrate total competence for the role. In discussion with the volunteer adviser, Alistair was convinced that it would only work if he approached the strategy positively. With the volunteer adviser Alistair reviewed the potential results and he concluded that the approach fitted his own drivers, which were both economic – he needed to earn again - and he had a strong desire to continue to make a valuable contribution to the world of work. These could be achieved with a lower salary and responsibilities, and Alistair acknowledged that while the status issues were not ideal for him, work at a lower level would be preferable to longer term unemployment.

The first hurdle was Alistair's CV, which failed to achieve any interviews – lower level or otherwise. In a one-to-one support session with the volunteer adviser, Alistair understood that his CV would not gain him interview opportunities at a lower level because it focused, not unreasonably, on a positive description of the range and depth of his many outstanding career successes.

Using advice from both his volunteer adviser and other jobseekers, Alistair made specific changes to his CV. He toned down the extent of his responsibilities.

Despite the changes he made to his CV, Alistair was still not getting enough interview opportunities.

Alistair asked for the volunteer adviser's help to review his CV and adapt it still further to tailor it precisely to the requirements of the next vacancies, making more evident the match between his skills and the job descriptions, but without declaring his additional skills.

However, when interviews took place, Alistair had some very awkward moments, including one where it was suggested that it was surprising that he had made so little progress over a long career – a difficult view to counter, under the circumstances.

Other objections arising at interviews included that he was over-qualified; that he might find it difficult to work with a younger team; that even his 'pared-down' experience was such that the role on offer might not hold his interest.

At the job club's group sessions, Alistair regularly rehearsed his answers to difficult questions, and tackled unspoken stereotyping, receiving feedback from other jobseekers on how to improve his responses.

To deal with similar objections at his interviews, including that he was over-qualified or too experienced for the role, Alistair benefited from a group job search presentation which covered using the three basic steps to assertiveness. Alistair practised by using them at home as well as at the executive job club. It gave him a good framework for handling a range of interview issues, including any potential difficulties in working with younger managers, which the interviewer might suggest.

Having worked for large corporate organisations previously, Alistair was unfamiliar with interviews which were not competence-based. He found it difficult to present his skills positively in the relatively unstructured interview situations he met in the small and medium sized business arena.

In the weekly meetings, volunteer advisers helped Alistair to structure a "tell me about yourself" response, focusing on his relevant skills, experience and appropriate achievements. He practised this every week, receiving feedback from the group, in preparation for interviews.

His volunteer adviser also suggested that he should write down the qualities and experience he would be seeking if the interview roles were reversed, and he were hiring - and ensure that he made the opportunity to talk about them during the interview.

Alistair needed to consider what would happen if he were to be offered a role at a lower level – would it be acceptable?

Alistair's volunteer adviser described the average drop in salary which many older managers have to take following redundancy, so that Alistair could see the big picture as well as his personal situation. However, Alistair's personal circumstances and aspirations were more important than any statistics.

The outcome for Alistair is a job which pays 20 per cent less than his last one, and the knowledge that his career was at a similar stage ten years previously, which is far from ideal. He also has to travel much more than he did in his previous role. However, Alistair is back in work and is delighted to have succeeded. He puts his success down to his own determination, flexibility, and financial circumstances which made it possible to take a job at a lower level. He also recognises the motivation, support and specific advice from the executive job club volunteers and fellow jobseekers.